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# SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN AND THE LABOUR MARKET IN THE UK: ATTITUDES, BARRIERS, SOLUTIONS

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**Abstract:** This paper draws on research carried out in the UK which examined the views of South Asian women towards employment, looking in particular at why the participation rate of Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in the labour market is very low. The focus of the paper is on non-working women. The research was aimed at informing policy design, so that policies intended to assist certain groups of people enter, or get closer to entering, the labour market might be more effective. The research involved carrying interviews with 212 Bangladeshi and Pakistani women in West Yorkshire, a sub-region of the UK with a relatively high Asian population. 26 focus groups were also carried out. It is argued that there are three broad groups of South Asian women in relation to employment: women who are some distance from the labour market; women who wish to enter paid work; and women who do currently work but require support. There are different policy implications for each of these groups. The paper concludes that the barriers to labour market entry are deep-seated, complex, and rooted in cultural, familial, and societal norms. It provides a case study of an innovative programme which was piloted in a nearby sub-region of the UK, South Yorkshire, which was tailor-made to meet the specific needs of South Asian women and was very successful. The paper argues that this could provide a template for programmes in the future aimed at assisting groups facing challenges in relation to labour market entry, such as minority ethnic women.

**Key words:** ethnicity; gender; work; aspirations; attitudes; employability policy.

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## 1. Introduction

Bangladeshi and Pakistani women are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive than any other group in the labour market in the UK (Nandi and Platt, 2010, p.6). Orthodox economic regeneration policies have largely failed to reach such groups of people in any meaningful or lasting way thus provoking a need for a re-evaluation of strategies aimed at boosting local economies and getting people into paid work, and this paper outlines a potential way forward in assisting minority ethnic groups to enter the labour market.

Participation rates in the labour market in the UK among certain groups of people have traditionally been very low. The participation rate of South Asian women, in particular, has been low, especially women of Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin. Figures published in 2010 show that non-employment, both unemployment and economic inactivity was 80 per cent among Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, compared to 30 to 50 per cent for other women (Nandi and Platt, 2010, p.6). This is a potential loss for the individual concerned and for the economy in general. This paper draws on primary research carried out in a sub-region of the UK, West Yorkshire, with a relatively high Asian population - over 10 per cent for the sub-region as a whole, and over 20 per cent for one of the larger cities within it, Bradford, - compared to less than 6 per cent for England and Wales (*The Guardian*, 2011). The paper examines the potential explanations for this low level of labour market participation, examining: the attitudes and aspirations of Pakistani and Bangladeshi non-working women; the ways in which they can be supported to enter the labour market; and provides a case study of one specific attempt at micro-intervention, implemented in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, UK, in 2006, which *did* achieve considerable success in relation to assisting South Asian women into, or at least closer to, the labour market. This novel approach was pioneered in three multi-ethnic, relatively deprived, areas of the city. Known as the *Ethnic Minority Women's Employability Project*, it was an innovative package designed to be culturally-sensitive and also to deploy new tools in assisting South Asian women. The project is worth recording and critically appraising because, with high unemployment across Europe, often concentrated among particular groups of people, and with higher numbers of people from minority ethnic groups than ever before in the UK and in other parts of Europe, new and innovative policies will be needed to bring about effective economic regeneration that can help individuals find paid work.

The paper, firstly, outlines the methodology employed in the primary research in West Yorkshire, England. Secondly, it reviews some of the barriers to labour market participation as outlined in existing literature. Thirdly, it looks at the educational backgrounds of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi women who were researched, examines their employment experiences, and shows that they can be categorised

into different groups. This aspect is important when turning to policy design later in the paper. Fourthly, the paper addresses barriers relating to peer pressure, discrimination, and aspirations. Fifthly, the paper outlines support needed to assist South Asian women in the labour market. The paper then outlines a strategy which was implemented to assist South Asian women into the labour market in Sheffield, South Yorkshire. Finally some conclusions are provided.

## **2. Methods**

Literature outlining the barriers to Pakistani and Bangladeshi women entering paid employment, and explanations for their low level of entry into the labour market, already existed prior to the primary research which was carried out across five local authority districts in West Yorkshire in 2007 (see for example, ANISSA UK, 2005; Ahmad, Modood, and Lissenburgh, 2003; Modood, Berthoud, Lakey, Nazroo, Smith et al, 1997). The aim of the research in West Yorkshire, however, was to go *beyond* an examination of those barriers, to explore Pakistani and Bangladeshi women's aspirations and views towards paid employment that would lead to practical policy proposals which could assist them to realise their potential and enter paid employment. A series of research tools were used in order to extract this information, primarily drawing upon qualitative methods.

Firstly, a literature review was carried out which focused on an examination of barriers to Pakistani and Bangladeshi women on a national, regional and local level, as well as seeking out additional research that examined the employment aspirations of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, for example Botcherby (2006). The information collected during this stage of the research provided a base from which to develop and fine-tune the empirical research questions and issues.

Secondly, 212 face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured, interviews with non-working Pakistani and Bangladeshi women living in West Yorkshire were carried out. To make sure that a cross section of the population was reached, a sampling frame was developed with target interview numbers for each of the five local authority districts in West Yorkshire. Efforts were made to ensure that the views of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women of different ages were captured.

Within each local authority district, wards with key concentrations of Pakistani and Bangladeshi residents were highlighted and, as far as possible, interviews took place across these wards. Interviewers used a variety of mechanisms for identifying women to be interviewed, including visiting local community centres, parent and toddler sessions, attending community events in parks, visiting shops, markets, calling at people's homes. The objective was to seek out people who do not usually participate in research and to 'take the research to them'.

'Community researchers' were recruited to maximise the effectiveness of the research itself and to provide a capacity-building exercise for those who got involved. These researchers were drawn from the community being researched. The vast majority of the interviews were carried out by Pakistani and Bangladeshi women living in West Yorkshire, all of whom received initial training and on-going support. This method ensured that it was possible to identify women who were suitable and willing to be interviewed. The interviews took place in English, Punjabi and Bengali. The majority of those interviewed spoke some English, ranging from the highest proportion at 87 per cent in Leeds, to the lowest at 73 per cent in Calderdale. However, the level of English spoken varied substantially from very good at one end of the scale, to some women who could understand English but could speak only a few sentences.

Twenty six focus groups with non-working, as well as with working, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were held across the five local authority districts, each of which followed a set of pre-defined issues/questions, to ensure consistency for analytical purposes. As part of the deliberate strategy to seek people out and reach people in places where they felt comfortable, the focus groups took place at a range of local community centre venues.

To capture the views, aspirations and perceptions of different Pakistani and Bangladeshi women across the sub-region effectively, it was felt important to deploy a variety of techniques. It was recognised that some women had valuable contributions to make but often feel unable to contribute through the conventional interview and focus group mechanisms. The research methodology, therefore, encompassed 13 interactive poster displays which were located in key venues across the sub-region frequented by Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. The methodological approach was created with the aim of being as inclusive as possible, and to hear the real stories of people so that policy guidance could be as effective as possible. In total, 1,112 Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were consulted, 212 through the in-depth interviews, 139 through the 26 focus groups, and 761 through the 13 interactive poster displays.

### ***3. Identifying perceived barriers of labour market entry for South Asian women through existing literature***

To help inform the empirical study, a review of existing literature was carried out which identified a number of categories of labour market barriers facing South Asian women, including: education; language; employment experience; cultural and societal norms; and discrimination. Each of these are summarised below and returned to in sections 4 and 5, which outline the empirical research findings.

### ***Education***

Black and minority ethnic individuals in general clearly face educational barriers. Tackey, Casebourne, Aston, Ritchie, and Sinclair et al (2006, p.2) note that people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage have the lowest levels of education and qualifications among people migrating to Britain aged 16 and over. Seeking reasons for the lack of educational achievement in an earlier study, Bhavnani (1994, p. 43), criticised teachers and careers services for the lack of guidance that had been given to South Asian women when they were at school. ANISSA (2005) reported similar findings from the women they interviewed, stating: 'Pakistani girls were marginalised because we were stereotyped, thinking all Pakistani girls get married at 16'. Several women surveyed by ANISSA felt that their parents had not encouraged them at school but that their male counterparts had been encouraged. A study by Tyrer and Ahmad (2006, p.31) found that it is important for careers services to have staff trained in, and who have an understanding of, the specific barriers facing Muslim women in education and the labour market.

Other research, carried out through the Economic and Social Research Council's Future of Work Programme by the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research at the University of Manchester, and utilising data from the 1991 and 2001 Censuses, highlighted the increase in uptake of higher qualifications amongst young South Asian women, especially those of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi women (Dale, Shaheen, Kalra and Fieldhouse, 2000). This indicates that some of the educational barriers may be lessening, at least for some, often younger, second or third generation Pakistani and Bangladeshi women.

### ***Language***

Fluency of English obviously affects the ability of women to enter paid employment. Learning English and attending appropriate classes is not always easy due to a range of issues such as lack of availability, childcare, other caring and domestic responsibilities. Ahmad et al's (2003) survey also found that some women, especially Bangladeshi women, were concerned about attending colleges in the UK for fear of being 'westernised'. Research carried out for the Department for Work and Pensions (Tackey et al., 2006, p.2), noted that people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage have the lowest level of English language proficiency of all the major minority ethnic groups. It pointed to the Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities in 1997, which found that only four per cent of Bangladeshi and only 28 per cent of Pakistani women aged 45-64 years spoke English fluently or well. Fluency in English, Tackey et al (2006) argued, increases people's probability of being employed by up to 25 per cent. Moreover, it put forward the view that poor English impacts negatively upon the views of prospective employers.

Data from the 2011 Census shows that this is a growing issue overall, as a decade of relatively high inward migration has increased the number of households in the country where no one speaks English to three million (Swinford, 2012, p.1). In many parts of London, for example, a quarter or more households do not have anyone for whom English is the main language. In Newham, the east London borough where the Olympics were hosted in 2012, 24.3 per cent of households have no one who speaks English as a main language (Bingham, 2012, p.1).

### ***Employment experience***

Disadvantage in the labour market for people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage overall arises, according to Tackey, Casebourne, Aston, Ritchie, and Sinclair et al (2006, p.2) because they have 'substantial' problems in relation to what they call human capital. 'Human capital', they argue, 'is the possession of high level qualifications, vocational skills and real world experience of work.' These challenges facing minority ethnic women in relation to the UK labour market were highlighted as recently as December 2012 in a report by the all-party Parliamentary group on race and community (comprised of Members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords), which found that large sections of minority ethnic women are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as their white counterparts. The report found that: 'Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are particularly affected, with 20.5 per cent being unemployed compared to 6.8 per cent of white women, and 17.7 per cent of black women also being unemployed.' Moreover, this higher unemployment rate covers all age groups. The report also states that the rate of joblessness for minority ethnic women has failed to come down in the past three decades. Moreover, evidence from the Equal Opportunities Commission (2006) in *Moving on up? Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Black Caribbean Women and Work*, found that when minority ethnic women are in work they are segregated into certain jobs. The report showed that 32 per cent of Bangladeshi women work in just five occupations, compared to 24 per cent of white women. Nevertheless, Ahmad et al's work (2003) showed that where Asian women have been employed they can act as positive role models and can pave the way for other women in their family and/or community to remain in education or enter the labour market.

### ***Cultural and societal norms***

Literature frequently emphasises the importance of traditional cultural values in the family, community, and societal spheres and discusses the impact that this has on perceptions of women's role in the labour market. It has been argued that lower rates of labour market participation by Bangladeshi and Pakistani women is due partly to

religious and cultural factors in Muslim communities, where women are firmly located within the domestic sphere (Modood, Berthoud, Lakey, Nazroo, Smith et al, 1997). Ahmad et al (2003) suggests that parental influence is important in the education of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women beyond the age of 16 and also in their participation and progression in paid work. Other findings, based on research in Oldham, demonstrates that remaining economically active after marriage is recognised by Pakistani and Bangladeshi women as requiring negotiation between the husband and mother-in-law and the woman herself (Dale et al, 2000).

ANISSA's (2005) report which examined barriers to employment suggests that, for many South Asian women, gaining employment is not necessarily seen as a priority, and that many of these women make a decision to stay at home, a choice made freely. Ahmad et al (2003) say that, of the women spoken to in their survey, many of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi women with young children preferred to look after their children themselves rather than leave their child with a non-family member. This was, in part, due to distrust of a stranger, but also due to the cost of childcare. Badawi (2007) explains in his article, Gender in Equity in Islam Basic Principles, how leaving children in the care of 'others' is at odds with Islamic culture, 'Islam regards her [woman's] role in society as a mother and a wife as her most sacred and essential one. Neither maids nor baby sitters can possibly take the mother's place as the educator of an upright, complex-free, and carefully reared child'. As Ahmad et al (2003) comments, this supports the general view that childcare still poses a significant barrier to employments amongst Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in particular.

Other authors (Anwar, 1999; Griffin, 1995; Khanum, 1990) suggest that some fathers encourage their daughters to do well at school but that this is primarily because 'an educated daughter can be seen as an advantage towards a dowry package.' However, Ahmad et al (2003) also point out that sometimes success is seen to change the individual women and they may become less accepted by other women in their community. The example provided is a Bangladeshi architect who designs fashion catwalks around the world and was hugely successful. She was seen to 'stand out' at events like weddings because of her expensive designer clothes and bags.

### ***Discrimination***

Numerous authors have postulated that minority ethnic women face disadvantage, discrimination and stereotyping in employment because of their gender and race (for example, Ahmad, et al, 2003; Bhavnani, Mirza, and Meetoo, 2005). These findings were reinforced by a Great Britain wide investigation into the participation, pay and progression of ethnic minority women in the labour market carried out in 2005 by the



Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), which focussed on Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean women (EOC, 2006). This research involved a survey of 812 Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and White British women in London, Birmingham, Bradford and Leeds. The survey focussed on three themes: aspirations, experiences and choices (Botcherby, 2006). One way in which discrimination can manifest itself is in relation to the ability of individuals to obtain work. Botcherby's research (2006) showed that around half minority ethnic women reported they had often, or sometimes, had difficulty finding a job, compared to about one third of white women. Furthermore, the same research concluded that one in five minority ethnic women compared to one in ten white women often work in a job below their potential because no one would employ them at the level they were qualified for. Minority ethnic women in Botcherby's (2006) sample were more likely to state that they often or sometimes have seen less qualified/experienced people promoted above them, this being especially so for Pakistani and Black Caribbean women.

More recently, the all-party Parliamentary group on race and community report, previously mentioned, stated that some minority ethnic women removed their hijab or made their names sound more English to try to beat discrimination in securing a job (Dodd, 2012, p.1). The report argued that prejudice and discrimination were responsible for a quarter of the higher rate of unemployment faced by women from Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other black communities. The role of discrimination in preventing labour market entry was corroborated by Tackey et al (2006, p.2) who also argued that it had impacted negatively on labour market outcomes, noting that 'Ethnic penalty is most severe for Pakistani and Bangladeshi men and women.'

#### ***4. The position of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in West Yorkshire in relation to education and employment***

The findings from the interviews and focus groups carried out with Pakistani and Bangladeshi women across West Yorkshire revealed that there are a whole range of issues which affect the extent to which Pakistani and Bangladeshi women undertake paid work, including caring responsibilities, education, community values, family perceptions and values, perceptions of Islamic culture, parental influence, existence of positive role models, class, wealth, and length of time they have been in the UK.

##### ***Experiences of education***

In terms of education, three broad categories of women emerged: those with no or little formal education; those whose education was curtailed; and those who were well educated. Some women, around 11 per cent of those interviewed, had no formal education, they had not been to school at all. When they came to England they often

had no understanding of the English language. Women falling into this category tended to be older, 35 years of age or more, first generation migrants. Many of these women were from poorer families and had been brought up in rural villages in either Pakistan or Bangladesh. Their families could not afford to send them to school, and/or as girls they were not expected to go to school and therefore they had no formal education. When they became teenagers, these women were often educated by their mothers. They were taught about two key issues, firstly about the Islamic faith which included reading the Koran, and secondly 'how to be a good wife', involving teaching them how to cook, prepare meals, and undertake domestic duties such as cleaning, washing and so on. A Pakistani mother of three, for example, 46 years old, said: *"I only went to school for a few months, the idea of working was never a consideration, it was expected that you get married and look after the children, school is not important to our families for us [women]"*.

A second group of women had been educated in Pakistan, Bangladesh or in England, frequently to school leaving age and often, but not always, had gained formal qualifications. Their qualifications included nationally recognised examination-based qualifications gained at school at standard and advanced level, and even degrees. Of the 212 women who were interviewed, 38 per cent had gained formal qualifications. Although women educated in England clearly had different educational experiences from those educated in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the common denominator between them was that they were *not permitted to continue their education beyond a certain level*. Some of the women might not have wanted to continue to study anyway, but many of those who were interviewed explained that they did not have a choice. All of these women claimed that their education was cut short by the fact that they 'had to get married', or sometimes to help care for members of their extended family. All of these women had arranged marriages and explained that as they were growing up they always knew that at some stage they would be expected to get married. As a Bangladeshi mother of five, aged 35, said: *"I dreamt of education, but it was not an option for me. I knew I'd have to get married at a young age and had to leave dreams of education and qualifications behind"*.

Some of the women were happy to get married and considered this part of life, something that they never questioned. For them, that was their life course. They always knew it was, and they accepted that. A Bangladeshi mother of two, aged 25, said, for example, *"I went to school in Bangladesh. I knew that I would be a housewife and mother some day....I am very happy to be a housewife and to stay that way and don't want that to change. I am happy as a wife and mother and don't want to work."*

The existence of this view amongst some Pakistani and Bangladeshi women was confirmed through the responses to the interactive poster display, where 10 per cent of those engaging with the display said that they could identify with the image of a woman who *'is happy looking after the family and doesn't want to work'*.

A smaller number of other women had faced a much more challenging time. They strongly resisted marriage and this often resulted in them being given a choice by their parents of marriage or discontinuing contact with their parents. In order to satisfy their parents' wishes, most women in this category eventually agreed to an arranged marriage. There was some evidence from the interviews with this group of women that things are starting to change, however, and many women whose education was stifled so they could marry and start a family said that they would not want the same thing to happen to their own daughters, and that their daughters are being encouraged to pursue their education.

What is interesting is that for a large proportion of this group of women who pursued their education until they had a marriage arranged for them, parental encouragement was highlighted as a key factor which enabled them to gain their qualifications. This links to the research carried out by Ahmad *et al* (2003), mentioned earlier, which concluded that parental influence is important in the education of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women beyond the age of 16 and also in their participation and progression in paid work. In particular, women in West Yorkshire mentioned their fathers and uncles and, to a lesser extent their mothers, as key sources of encouragement when they were at school. However, these parents then effectively halted their daughter's educational achievement by arranging marriages for them and then expecting them to have children and stop their studies.

As one Pakistani woman, aged 60, said: *"mothers and fathers especially want their daughters to do well at school, it's a pride thing. They might even encourage their daughters to go to University. But then they are expected to marry. The education is to say that 'our family can do it' not to get them a job or career."*

Her daughter, aged 40: *"Yes, and then there are all sorts of problems, the woman might have been educated and has been taught to think for herself, has raised aspirations and then she is expected to get married and is much less likely to want to go along with that than if she'd not been educated to such a high level"*.

The reasons for this paradox – parental encouragement in education followed by parental pressure for educational curtailment – are many faceted. As noted above, 'honour' and family pride may be one factor. Evidence from the experiences of research team itself, together with some of the existing literature mentioned earlier (Anwar, 1999; Griffin, 1995; Khanum, 1990), suggests that one of the reasons that some fathers encourage their daughters to do well at school is that 'an educated daughter can be seen as an advantage towards a dowry package' and so having an educated daughter has a particular advantage *'if only for the prestige in the marriage market'* (Khanum, 1990, p.13). This latter perception was supported in discussions held in a focus group of professional Pakistani women.

A third, much smaller group, comprised of women who tended to be fairly young, in their early twenties, and had been educated to at least degree level, often in England but also in Pakistan and Bangladesh too. 24 of the 212 women (11 per cent) who were interviewed possessed a degree, a slightly higher proportion of these being Pakistani than Bangladeshi (31 per cent and 26 per cent respectively). Around two thirds of those educated to degree standard (16 women) were highly ambitious and motivated, and had decided that they were going to have a career and delay both marriage and childbirth. Some of these well educated young women had 'love' partners and had decided not to have an arranged marriage.

The key difference between these well educated women and those in the two earlier categories was social class. The well educated were more likely to come from 'professional and managerial' families, whose fathers worked in relatively well paid occupations. Often female members of their family - their mothers, sisters and aunts - had worked too. Again this confirms what was found in the study by Ahmad *et al* (2003) where women pointed to other women working and studying within the family such as older sisters, mothers, cousins or aunts who acted as positive role models for them, and therefore paved the way for them to remain in education or enter the labour market.

#### *Experiences of paid work*

The vast majority of the women who were interviewed across West Yorkshire had little, if any, experience of paid work. Many women (42 per cent) stated that they had never worked in the formal economy and had not had any experience of paid work. This pattern was similar for both Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. Looking at the women who *did* have experience of paid work, however, three broad categories emerged and again, this has implications for policy design and response.

The first group of women had gained work experience whilst studying. This was a relatively small group of women who were highly educated, often to degree level, and had gained work experience while studying for their degree or as part of a work placement for their degree. A second group was working out of necessity, to supplement the family income. One of the principal driving forces behind these women entering the labour market appears to have been their need to purchase a house and pay off the mortgage as quickly as possible as debt associated with mortgages is something that they are not comfortable with. Some of these women worked in the formal sector of the economy, though others were in the *informal* sector, often working as home workers making food items such as samosas and clothes for very little financial reward. They worked out of financial necessity but were unable to obtain work in the formal economy. Research by the National Group on Home working (2004) demonstrated that a large proportion of South Asian women

working from home are unaware of legislation regarding the minimum wage in Britain and are working for much less than the legal hourly rate. They also have a lack of understanding of working conditions, insurance and rights.

A third group of women had had their work experience interrupted. These tended to be younger, second or third generation migrants, who had chosen to work, gained work experience prior to having children, but had not been able to, or not wished to, return to paid employment because of their child and other care responsibilities, and the domestic duties they were expected to fulfil. The types of jobs that the women in this category had undertaken were concentrated into a narrow range of relatively low paid, part-time, stereotypical feminine occupations such as shop assistants, packing in factories, school dinner assistants and sometimes teaching assistants. This evidence corroborates that of the Equal Opportunities Commission (2006) mentioned earlier which shows that minority ethnic women and Bangladeshi women, in particular, work in a small number of occupations, compared to white women.

### ***5. Non-educational barriers to labour market entry***

The extensive consultations with Pakistani and Bangladeshi women provided a strong understanding of the barriers that face them in relation to entering the paid labour market. Barriers relating to education and employment experience facing many Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are examined above. This section looks at three other broad categories of barriers: peer pressure; discrimination; and aspirations.

#### ***Peer pressure***

Some non-working women interviewed who had worked in the past explained that they were perceived to be 'different', almost outcasts, by their own community. This was particularly noticeable amongst older, first generation migrants who had worked when they first came to the country up to forty years ago. In one focus group, for example, a 60 year old woman who worked at the local confectionary factory on the production line when she first arrived in the UK said that other Asian women in her community would talk about her when she went into the local shops saying that she was 'a loose woman'. She said: "you see they didn't know about work, they had never worked, they assumed that I was going to a place that was full of men. Actually all the workers on the production line were women". The general consensus amongst the women who were interviewed and who participated in the focus groups was that things had changed a lot since then but that the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities often continued to hold perceptions and make judgements about women who worked, particularly if they were different in some way, for example very successful, in a senior position, or in a stereotypical masculine occupation. This is

interesting as it supports the research carried out by Ahmad *et al* (2003) which demonstrated that sometimes working women are perceived in certain ways by others in their community and that sometimes success is seen to change the individual women and they may become less accepted by other women in their community.

This peer pressure is often intensified through the attitudes of the extended family and affects women's abilities to work further still. A focus group of graduates at University of Bradford confirmed this, with participants stating that: "families are always under pressure from extended family members to stop their daughters working". Family and community pressure not to work was also discussed in the other focus groups. The traditional view of family life, where the wife is expected to stay at home and care for the family, was described as the norm by many focus group participants. One key obstacle to work, then, was that it was not culturally acceptable for women to work outside of the home in the same way that it was for men. Views of husbands, parents, and parents-in-law appeared to be particularly important in determining whether women would be able to enter and remain in paid employment. This was a common reoccurring theme, although there was also evidence to suggest that it was becoming more acceptable within many families and within many communities for women to work. As a professional Pakistani woman said: „*People in the community have accepted the fact that Asian women will work. Even though maybe ten years ago it was frowned upon if a woman was to work*".

### ***Discrimination at work***

Another collection of barriers to Pakistani and Bangladeshi women entering the labour market relates to discrimination. Evidence from the research in West Yorkshire confirms what has already be written by other authors (such as Ahmad, et al, 2003; Bhavnani, Mirza, and Meetoo, 2005) to some extent, with numerous examples cited of Asian women, including graduates, finding it difficult to obtain employment. Some Pakistani graduates, for example, had difficulties finding work that they were qualified for and stated that they had to fall back on work at local call centres. As one Pakistani young woman said at a focus group: "*Finding work is not the problem, the jobs are there week after week advertised, but they don't want to give them to you, you see it when you go for an interview they don't want a Paki for the job*".

This kind of discrimination, which was also mentioned by Botcherby (2006), where minority ethnic women were found to be working below their ability in the workplace, was not mentioned frequently in the research in West Yorkshire but this may be because the majority of the women who were interviewed were non-working, and had a lack of experience of working in the formal paid labour market. However, some of the working women who participated in the focus groups suggested that they had

been overlooked for promotion or that they had to work twice as hard as non-Asian women in order to obtain promotion.

Furthermore, the focus group of graduates pointed out that they face discrimination in relation to the types of contracts they are offered in comparison to white workers, and also in their abilities to achieve promotion: *"I worked for [a big local authority], and in our department all the Asian workers were always on temporary contracts, or part-time contracts"*.

### ***Wearing traditional dress***

The non-working women in West Yorkshire were asked specifically about how they would feel about wearing traditional dress including the hijab at work. Most women explained that they would wear the types of clothes that they normally wear. So, for example, women who tend to wear western clothes on a daily basis stated that they would continue to do this if they undertook paid work. Other women who wear the hijab on a daily basis, for example, stated that they would continue to wear the hijab if they obtained paid work. Because so few of the women who were interviewed had any experience of paid work, it was not possible to explore in more detail their experiences of wearing traditional dress at work and the extent to which this affected the way in which they were treated or perceived. However, this subject was raised in many of the focus groups by the women themselves, particularly amongst those who were currently working. A Bangladeshi mother of two, aged 45, said: *"It's like if you wear the hijab and for a job, you know they are not going to give you the job, they don't have to say anything, the look says it all. I worked at a bank and was the assistant manager there and always thought I would reach management position, then I went to Hajj and when I came back I decided to wear the hijab. I lasted six months. They indiscriminately made my working life impossible. I left and started to work at another bank, never went beyond the front desk. If your face, or more so your dress sense, don't fit you don't get the job"*.

Similar issues around dress also emerged in a focus group held in West Yorkshire of Pakistani graduates, and another focus group of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. As one said: *"I know and have heard if you dress as Pakistani you won't get the job, if you dress as a white you will be more successful in getting the job"*.

### ***Knowledge of the English language***

Women attending the focus groups often felt that their less than perfect command of the English language and, additionally, the impact of this lack of English on health and safety issues, was often being used as an excuse not to employ them. This was

a source of annoyance to many of the women who, in one group, contrasted this to the way they perceive their east European counterparts are dealt with: *“but what I don’t understand is that they tell us we can’t work because we don’t have the language skills, and don’t have the understanding of health and safety procedures, but yet they employ eastern European women who don’t speak English”*.

### **Aspirations**

A central element of the study in West Yorkshire was to establish information about the aspirations and ambitions of Pakistani and Bangladeshi non-working women. Previous studies on minority ethnic women had focused on the barriers and obstacles to them entering paid work, but the aim of this research in West Yorkshire was to go beyond that and discover what they wanted to achieve in their lives. The women were asked, therefore, about their aspirations when they were younger at school, as they grew up, and their aspirations now for the future. Again different broad categories of women seemed to emerge from the interviews.

The first category of women did not have any ambitions or ideas about work or education when they were of school age. These women expected to grow up, get married, have children and take care of older relatives, if and when that was required. Women falling into this category tended to be comprised of those without any formal education, and those with formal education and qualifications but whose education was halted through arranged marriages and subsequent childbirth. For many of these women ‘marrying into a good and wealthy family’ was their ‘ambition’ for the future. Almost half the women who were interviewed stated that they had no ambitions in relation to paid work when they were of school age, a pattern similar for both Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. They had very low aspirations for the future. Asked ‘if they could do anything at all if their life what would they like to do?’ often this group of women had difficulty answering the question. A 57 year old Pakistani mother of six, made the following statement which was typical of this group of women: *“The only ambition for girls from the village was to get married into good family not too far from my parents’ home.”*

The second category of women were those who had ideas and ambitions when they were at school about jobs they would have liked to pursue in the future but who did not manage to fulfil these ambitions, again primarily because they married at a young age and had children. Just over two fifths (43 per cent) of those who were interviewed fell into this category. Pakistani women were slightly more likely to say that they had ambitions towards work that they did not pursue than Bangladeshi women (50 per cent and 41 per cent respectively). Women falling into this category varied, as did their ideas and ambitions. Some had no formal education, some had qualifications from Pakistan and Bangladesh, some had nationally recognised qualifications from UK schools and



colleges, and some had degrees. Some mentioned occupations such as school teacher, teaching assistant, nursery nurse, hairdresser and beautician, jobs which are clearly stereotypical feminine occupations. Very few of the women had ambitions and aspirations beyond these gender stereotypes. Many of the women had married early, often between the age of 16 and 25, although sometimes as young as 14 (in Bangladesh). The typical life-course was to marry early, become pregnant not long after marriage and then spend their life rearing and caring for their children, carrying out domestic duties around the home and, sometimes, caring for older relatives too. For these women the ideas and ambitions that they had at school age seem to be in the distant past and now they seem to have almost 'given up' on those ideas and ambitions and are settled on a life at home, caring, cooking and cleaning.

Around a half of this second category of women (45 women) now appear to be quite happy with this domestic and caring role in life and, in fact, explain that although at one time they would have liked to have worked they are currently quite happy with their family life and would not want to work now. This pattern was exactly the same (in terms of percentages) for both Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. Moreover, when asked 'if they could do anything they wanted in their life what would they like to do?' Most of these women do not really have any clear ideas beyond what they are currently doing. As a Bangladeshi mother of one, aged 23, said: *"I don't have an ideal job. My family is my job. ...I don't know what I want to do, just to look after my family and my husband."*

The remainder of this second category of women who had ideas and ambitions about particular jobs or occupations when they were younger, but were unable to fulfil their ambitions because they got married early and had children, felt frustrated and would now like to pursue paid employment. 46 of the 91 women who had ambitions at school age but did not pursue them fell into this category. This pattern was almost identical for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women. Some women changed the types of jobs that they would like to carry out since their school days, but many would still like to pursue their dream job. As a Pakistani mother of three, aged 34, said: *"I wanted to be a social worker but had to get married early, had children, and then got divorced, so it was difficult to have a career. Originally I'd planned to get a good job then to get married. I ran away to a refuge when I was younger because I didn't want to marry so young. My mother then arranged a second marriage for me so I'd have a companion.... I would still like to be a care worker or social worker...It's annoying that I can't do my dream job"*

For many of these women, early marriage, followed by childbirth and caring responsibilities for their children and sometimes for older relatives, has acted as a barrier for them pursuing and achieving their employment goal. Some of these women were very well educated to undergraduate level but still had difficulties achieving their goal due to family caring and domestic responsibilities. As a Pakistani

mother of two, aged 28, said: *"I got my degree and then was sent to Pakistan to get married against my wishes. I wanted to be a lawyer and travel but I won't be able to do this now I have a husband and children...maybe when the children are grown up but then it'll be too late"*.

The women who were consulted and fell into this category – wanting to work but unable to do so – explained that they face a range of different barriers. Some women faced multiple barriers: a lack of affordable childcare; their potential earnings being less than welfare benefits; pressure from the extended family; and a lack of confidence.

One of the key issues that emerged as a barrier was the lack of availability of affordable childcare. The issue of whether or not it was financially worthwhile to work was also mentioned in relation to the benefits system and levels of pay. Some of the women in the focus groups said they thought that they would often be better off financially by claiming state benefits than obtaining a low paid job, particularly if they had to pay for childcare. There were then women who desperately wanted to work but their husbands or in-laws were preventing them. As a Pakistani mother of three, aged 21, said: *"I want to work when my youngest child goes to school but my husband won't like it. He wouldn't like me working, he wouldn't like me working with men."*

Some of these women explained that their husbands not only prevented them from working but also from leaving the house. A key policy implication arising from this is the importance of adopting a holistic approach to assisting Pakistani and Bangladeshi women into the labour market, which includes engaging with South Asian men too. Many of the women explained that their husbands and family thought that there was no financial need for women to work, and that the responsibility for supporting the family financially should fall upon the male, emphasising the existence, indeed the cultural dominance, of the male breadwinner model (Lewis, 1992) within much of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi community.

Even if they could overcome obstacles from their husbands and family many of the women falling in this category – wanting to work but unable to do so – often had little, if any, work experience, and may not have had relevant qualifications. But a really crucial factor was that they often lacked confidence and knowledge about how to find and apply for a job and, even, what a job entails on a daily basis. This emerged strongly in the focus groups. As a Pakistani mother of one, aged 25, said: *"I don't know where to start, where do you find jobs? I don't have the confidence to get a job or apply for a job. I haven't got any work experience. I'm not happy with the way that my working life has gone because I always wanted to work. I still want to work but I'm not sure where to start."*

The final category was comprised of very ambitious women. Their ambitions were long standing, often held since they were at school. Well educated, to the equivalent of advanced school or college certificates or degree standard, around 16 women (8

per cent) fell into this category and they were more likely to be Pakistani than Bangladeshi. As mentioned previously, these women tend to be those whose fathers are in professional or managerial occupations and whose mothers, aunts and sisters work or have worked in the past. Some of these women were currently studying for degrees and it is clear from the interviews that the likelihood of them entering the workplace will be determined by a series of factors: how soon they marry; the views of their husband and his family towards women working in the paid labour market; how quickly after marriage they have children; the level of support from their friends, family and the surrounding community; as well as their own determination to succeed in paid work. However, even amongst this group of women, a very clear message emerged that working at the same time as they were bringing up small children, up to the age of five (when they can attend school), is not seen as compatible. This relates back to the work of Badawi (2007) who suggests that leaving children in the care of others is at odds with Islamic culture.

#### ***6. Supporting South Asian women to enter the labour market***

The research documented here has demonstrated that, in relation to labour market entry and participation, there are three broad categories of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in West Yorkshire and therefore, presumably, in the UK: women who are some distance from the labour market; women who currently wish to enter paid work; women who currently work but require support. Clearly within each of these broad groups, individual circumstances vary. Policies aimed at assisting them need to be flexible enough to accommodate a range of individual needs and requirements.

#### ***Supporting women who are some distance from the labour market***

The first group of women do not want to work, had no intention of working at that time in their lives, and were unlikely to want to work in the immediate future. These women, for various reasons, have taken on the stereo-typical feminine role of staying at home, bringing up children, caring for older relatives, carrying out domestic responsibilities such as cooking and cleaning. There is a community, cultural and family expectation amongst a large group of Pakistani and Bangladeshi people that women do not carry out paid work, unless there are severe financial reasons for doing so. The study outlined here reveals that almost all the Pakistani and Bangladeshi women who participated in the research - regardless of their class, ethnicity, age or country of birth - strongly believe that they should be the main carers for their children, at least until children are school age. Women falling into this category were more likely to be first generation migrants, with less education and lower level qualifications, less likely to have a good understanding of English, or they

may have married into families who have a strong belief in rigid gender roles in society. For these women, developing policies that will assist them into work in the short to medium term would seem to be inappropriate and a largely inefficient use of resources. A large amount of pre-interventionist support would be needed before these women are in a position to even think about entering paid employment. Moreover, as Ahmad *et al* (2003) points out, many of these women feel they should have a right to decide if they want to work or if they want to stay at home and bring up their children. More appropriate policies for these women in the short term would be to assist them to develop their language skills, provide them with initiatives that help them engage in society, building on skills and interests that they already have such as cooking, sewing, childcare, providing meeting places and peer support structures so that they can develop as individuals, providing confidence building, assertiveness and motivation support so they can start to think that a different route is possible. In this way these women, who have deeply engrained stereotypical perceptions of their own roles in society, and/or whose family have, may then start to think about the wider world and their place and contribution to it. At the same time as providing this kind of support, strategies are also required for their family, particularly for older relatives and husbands. Within the few schemes that have existed to help Pakistani and Bangladeshi women into work, often attempts are made to provide them with the confidence and skills to obtain work, without any attention being paid to how these women are then to persuade their husbands and extended family that they should be allowed to work in the future.

### ***Supporting women who wish to enter paid work***

The research has shown that there is then a group of other women who wish to work but have a series of barriers and obstacles preventing them. These are often multitudinous and encompass both demand and supply side barriers. Supply side barriers include: caring responsibilities, domestic responsibilities, poor English, lack of confidence, lack of qualifications, lack of appropriate skills, lack of work experience, lack of experience of applying for jobs, lack of experience of interviews, some women (and/or their husbands) may not wish to work with men, stereotypical gender perceptions of husbands, parents, parent-in laws and other family members. There are then demand side barriers which include the types of jobs that are available, the location of the jobs, working hours, employer policies, procedures and attitudes. The distance that these women are from the labour market is clearly dependent upon the number and types of obstacles and barriers that each of them faces. Many of these women desperately wanted to work but needed assistance to overcome these barriers. The precise barriers for each of the women varied, and as one woman in a focus group explained '*it is important to find out exactly what support Asian women need, to provide one to one counselling and support and guidance from people who understand their position, where they should go next*'.

### ***Supporting women who currently work but require support***

Although the research in West Yorkshire was primarily concerned with the views and attitudes of non-working Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, it became clear through analysing the existing literature, evidence from the interviews, and from the focus groups, that in developing policy mechanisms and recommendations for non-working women, the issues facing working women also need to be addressed. Many Pakistani and Bangladeshi working women appear to need additional support to both remain in, and progress within, the employment hierarchy.

### ***7. A Case study of employability support: Ethnic Minority Women's Employment Programme***

Clearly, the barriers facing Pakistani and Bangladeshi women seeking to enter the labour market in the UK are both complex and deeply entrenched. Little impact has been made by mainstream efforts to find jobs for these groups of people in the UK. However, there have been some notable successes, one of which was piloted in Sheffield in South Yorkshire in 2005/6. It is worth recounting it here, because it was a programme specifically designed to meet the needs of minority ethnic women, in particular South Asian women, and because it addressed many of the barriers discussed earlier. In that sense, it forms a potential template to help other minority ethnic women get closer to obtaining employment. The programme was designed and implemented by the Policy Evaluation Group (PEG), a private sector research and training organisation, and funded by Jobcentre Plus, the government's main employment agency. It was designed to help move Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in Sheffield closer to the labour market. As with the women who were researched in West Yorkshire, the women in Sheffield faced significant barriers in accessing employment including poor English, barriers from family, friends and the community. Very few had ever worked; confidence and self-esteem was very low. The eight month pilot project was a huge success and exceeded the anticipated outputs and outcomes set for it by Jobcentre Plus. The project aimed to move 30 women closer to the labour market and the approach is detailed below.

Recruitment was pro-active. Given the lack of confidence of some women, and the cultural pressures against carrying out paid work, recruitment had to be pro-active. The programme organisers contacted community organisations, organisations supporting children and their mothers, doctors' surgeries, and anywhere else that they thought might be fruitful, to obtain referrals to the programme. Posters were displayed, and leaflets distributed, in local communities which had a high minority ethnic population, in shops, schools, housing offices, mosques, doctors' surgeries, community centres. Outreach workers walked around the communities, engaging with potential participants and recruiting them. Over 100 referrals were made, and 63 participants started the programme.

For each of the participants, action plans were drawn up in order to identify their needs and requirements for moving closer to the labour market. These were reviewed at the end of each session, and mentors assisted the participants to meet targets set in the action plan. Three community group venues were used for the training provision across Sheffield, in locations of high minority ethnic populations. They were deliberately chosen as places where the women would feel comfortable and not threatened. Another issue was making sure that the women attended. Again, the approach was pro-active. Each of the women was contacted prior to each session by 'phone and/or text to remind them of the training. Participants who lacked confidence were directly transported to and from the training venues.

Twelve sessions were offered in each of the three venues over a four month period. Participants were encouraged to attend all sessions, and new starts were only allowed up to session four. The sessions mainly focused on 'soft skills' such as confidence building, life planning, and assertiveness. Signposting to training, education, and to job brokers took place during every session.

26 women completed the course in full. All of them were signposted to further training and/or employment opportunities. 15 applied for a job and/or training course, exceeding the target of 10 set by Jobcentre Plus. Two even actually entered work while attending the course, which was beyond the outcome targets. In a real reflection of its success, all the women on the programme said that they would recommend the course to other women. An independent evaluation of the programme (Craig, 2006) concluded: '*many customers gained in confidence and this will put them in a good position to start seeking work or additional training programmes*'. Quotes from the women themselves who had been on the programme included this from one woman: "*This course has given me more confidence and encouragement. Now I know what I want*".

## **8. Conclusions**

This paper has examined the attitudes and beliefs of non-working Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in relation to the labour market in the UK. Primary research was carried out in West Yorkshire, a sub-region with a relatively high Asian population, involving a multi-faceted, and extensive, consultation with Pakistani and Bangladeshi women: 1,112 Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were consulted through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and through an interactive poster display in various venues.

This is an important area to examine. The participation rate in the labour market of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women remains very low. Nandi and Platt (2010, p.6) demonstrate the extent of non-economic activity which, at 80 per cent for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, compares to 30 to 50 per cent for women from other ethnic groups. This non-economic activity is a potential loss for the individual and for the

economy as a whole. The National Audit Office (2008, p.1), for example, estimated that the overall cost to the economy from failure to fully use the talents of people from ethnic minorities could be around £8.6 billion annually.

Moreover, this is potentially a growing challenge for the UK economy given migration trends over the last decade. Figures from the Census show that the number of foreign born residents rose by more than 50 per cent over the decade, to reach 7.5 million in 2011 (Swinford, 2012, p.1). A high proportion of the new migrants – up to 20 to 25 per cent in several London boroughs, for example – cannot speak English (Bingham, 2012, p.1). As Tackey et al (2006, p.4) note: ‘demographically, ethnic minorities will account for increasingly large proportions of the working age population, providing a clear business case for raising the participation of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in the workforce.’

Many Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in the UK face a series of barriers in relation to entering the labour market. The literature reviewed characterised these barriers as relating to education, language, employment experience, cultural and societal norms, and discrimination. These barriers were borne out by the primary research with non-working Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in West Yorkshire, which confirmed the extent to which these constraints govern behavioural patterns towards paid employment. Three broad categories of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in relation to labour market entry were identified in West Yorkshire and, by extension, these categories are presumably applicable to the UK as a whole: women who are some distance from the labour market; women who currently wish to enter paid work; women who currently work but require support.

The barriers facing Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in relation to the labour market are complex and deep-seated, because some of them relate to cultural, societal, and familial norms. The research carried out in West Yorkshire, which is documented here, has added to the understanding of those barriers and, in that sense, contributes to the chance of devising policies that are effective for this group of people.

Prolonged recession in the UK, coupled with continuing financial crisis across the Eurozone, has resulted in high unemployment. In a situation where people in general are struggling to find paid employment, it is easy to see a situation in which those who are furthest away from the labour market, with relatively low levels of ‘human capital’ – say, in this case, Bangladeshi and Pakistani women – will be overlooked within labour market recruitment processes. Given that the minority ethnic population in the UK has grown considerably in the last few years, and given also that participation in the labour market by minority ethnic women has traditionally been very low, and remains very low, the importance of finding effective policies in this direction cannot be overstated. Though, as Tackey et al (2006, p.4) note, ‘welfare-to-

work programmes may not be operating as effectively for ethnic minorities as they do for the White population, and Jobcentre Plus staff do not always reflect the communities they serve.' This is why, as the case study presented here of a successful pilot policy aimed at getting South Asian women closer to the labour market has demonstrated, such policies need to be tailored for the client group that they are addressing. General welfare-to-work programmes are almost certainly unable to reach groups such as Bangladeshi and Pakistani women, where the stock of 'human capital' is relatively low, and the social, cultural, familial, and community barriers are relatively high. Overall, the main requirement of policy here is that it should take cognisance of the multiple barriers to labour market entry and address those barriers with flexibility and responsiveness.

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# DEFINING AND MEASURING PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYMENT: ROMANIA'S CASE

*Monica MARIN<sup>1</sup>*

**Abstract:** *This paper is about the number of public sector employees in Romania. Subsequent research questions relate to defining what is the public sector in Romania, what are the data sources on employment in public sector units, which is the quality of the data provided and what are the solutions for improvement of administrative records. The study is based on a desk-review of national and international studies on public sector employment and examination of different national data sources for statistics on public sector. The study provides recommendations for improving data accuracy, directed mainly to the Ministry of Public Finance.*

**Keywords:** *public sector employment; administrative data sources; government employees; public personnel.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper is about the number of public sector employees in Romania. The size of the public sector becomes critical especially in times of economic crisis (Alonso, 2011; Lee, Strang, 2003; Boc, 2011). However, defining what is public sector and most important, measuring it through reliable data sources is not always straightforward. Therefore, downsizing policy options should first carefully examine the information available at the lowest disaggregated level, with as much as possible additional economic and socio-demographic data.

The paper looks at the methodological issues related to defining and measuring public sector employment in Romania. The main research question is represented by how many public sector employees are in Romania. Subsequent research questions

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